

The Risks We Take by **carrymehome**

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Summary: Updated summary: Hopper and Eleven, beginning December 12, 1983. Because two untrusting people who've been hurt in the past don't become a father/daughter pair overnight.

1. Chapter 1

A/N I preordered my copy of the prequel and it's put me in a back story frame of mind. I'm not sure how much more of "Season 1.5" I'll get into, but for now, this the missing scene between the flashback scenes where Hopper finally finds Eleven in the woods and when he brings her to the cabin. It's night when he finds her, day when he takes her to the cabin, she's cleaned up but they're both wearing the same clothes.

December 12, 1983.

He stood there in the cold, staring in disbelief at the slight girl before him. She was shivering, filthy, and even though she was swimming in the over large coat and hat, he could see she was painfully thin. He'd been looking for her and leaving her food for nearly three weeks, ever since the old man reported being attacked in those woods and having his coat stolen. But to actually draw her out, well, Hopper was oddly ill prepared. He felt like the dog who'd finally caught the car.

"Hey there," he finally spoke, breaking the silence. He kept his feet planted and made the conscious effort not to make any sudden movements as though she was an injured animal who might bolt before he could help. "Do you remember me?"

Eleven didn't move, not entirely convinced her decision to show herself was a good one. That night wasn't the first time she'd watched him leaving her food. He'd been coming regularly and she'd been watching him, waiting until he was safely out of sight before she took the food and hid. But that night was cold, colder than it had been. It had been snowing and the wind bit her exposed legs like an invisible predator. He might not be a safe person, but she knew she wouldn't survive in the woods much longer on her own either.

"I'm not gonna hurt you, okay?" Hopper reassured her almost as though he'd read her thoughts. "We need to get you warm and I've got the heater all warmed up in my car." He turned and gestured towards the Blazer behind him. He could see she was shaking, but it was impossible to tell how much was cold and how much was nerves.

"Bad men?" she asked, her voice dry and cracked. It might have been the first words she'd said since she'd run from Mike's house. She wasn't sure, it had all become a blur in an effort to just stay alive.

"Nah, kid. No bad men here. Not right now, anyway," he looked over his shoulders making sure he was telling the truth.

Hopper opened the passenger door and gestured for her to climb inside. "Go on ahead. You'll be safe. I'll make sure of it." And this time he really would. If it was the last thing he did, he would.

"Promise?" She knew the man had helped saved Will, but that didn't mean he'd help her. She'd been watching him leave food for her, but that didn't mean he wasn't doing it to lure her back to the lab. If she stayed in the woods, she would surely die. If she went with him, she at least had a chance.

She would have to take the risk.

"Yeah, kid. I promise."

Promise?

It means something that you can't break. Ever.

She finally climbed into the car and as Hopper closed the door behind her, he thought like mad what to do next. Taking her to the trailer was out of the question. Government agents had already broken into his place and bugged it once, God only knew how closely they were monitoring him now. He decided he would need to take her to a motel for the night until he thought of a better plan. He peeked into his billfold to confirm he had enough cash on him to get a room for the night without leaving a paper trail.

"Ok, kid," he announced as he settled into the driver's seat, "We're going to go somewhere those bad men don't know to look."

He smiled at her, hoping she was more comforted by his bravado than he was. She just looked at him with those giant, deer in the headlights eyes of hers. He wasn't sure he if saw trust or desperation in them. Maybe a little of both.

Hopper was more familiar with the motels on the outskirts of Hawkins than was strictly decent, but at least it came in handy in times like these. He paid cash for a double room and signed the guest register under a false name. He offered no explanation as to why the name tag on his uniform didn't match his name on the registry and the motel clerk didn't ask. He was the fourth John Smith to sign into the motel that evening. It was that kind of establishment. Hopper parked the Blazer as close to the room door as possible and ushered Eleven inside before anyone noticed her. It occurred to him that he should consider getting an ordinary car for personal use, though it was too late to do anything about it just then.

She'd been sitting in the car with the heat blowing full blast for half an hour at that point, but she didn't feel like she'd ever be warm again. Hopper chained the door, secured the deadbolt and made sure the curtains didn't have any gaps before going into autopilot, letting his first aid training kick in.

"Ok, kid. We've really got to get you warmed up and out of those shoes. They're a bit wet and I need to make sure your toes don't have any frostbite."

She looked at him with wide eyes and he wasn't sure how much she understood. Hopper decided to take a different approach.

"I'm just going to untie them, is that ok?" he asked as he knelt down in front of her.

She nodded and he slowly untied and loosened the shoes. If she had severe frostbite, her skin would be particularly fragile and he couldn't very well take her to a hospital. Step by painstaking step, Hopper got Eleven to let him remove her shoes and then her socks as he talked her through the process. Her toes were icy cold and the color of porcelain, but given how long she'd been out in the snow in canvas shoes, it could have been much worse.

"I'm going to run you a hot bath," he said as he stepped into the bathroom before adding unnecessarily, "don't go anywhere."

"Bath?" she sounded terrified and Hopper suddenly remembered why.

"Not that kind of bath, kid. Just the regular old get clean and warm kind. I'll even put bubbles in it for you," he added thinking that bubbles would give her additional modesty and help soak the grime off her body.

She now looked both nervous and confused.

"Ok, kid," Hopper sighed, thinking how he was going to explain. "Watch this."

Hopper motioned for her to follow him into the bathroom. She stood in the doorway looking over his shoulder as he took the little bottle of liquid soap and squeezed it into the stream of hot water.

"See? Bubbles."

"Bubbles," she repeated back slowly, clearly unfamiliar with the word.

"That's right. Now I'm just going to undo the back of this dress for you and then leave you to take your bath, ok?"

"Yes," she agreed softly.

"I'll be right outside if you need me," Hopper told her as he left the bathroom.

"Wait!" Eleven called out and the door was frozen in place.

"What's wrong, kid?"

She nervously considered whether to explain or not. Was the man like Mike who left the door open so she wouldn't be scared? Or was he like Papa who dismissed her fears and used them against her.

"Open?" she asked with a slight quaver. He failed to notice how much of a leap of faith that single question was.

"You want the door open? Ok, I can leave it open," Hopper responded as though it was no big deal. "You stay here and soak in the hot water, I'm going to get you something to eat, alright?"

Hopper didn't want to leave her alone and vulnerable, so he stood outside the motel door and surveyed his options. He spotted two vending machines next to the motel office. Perfect. He returned momentarily with a few bottles of apple juice and some packets of peanut butter crackers hoping to quickly restore her blood sugar without making her sick.

"Don't worry, kid, it's just me," he announced as he let himself into the motel room. "You doing ok in there?"

"Hurts," she said simply from the other side of the bathroom door.

"What hurts?"

There was no response, just a faint whimper.

"Ok kid, I'm coming in."

He fully expected a girl her age to be embarrassed to be nude in front of an adult man, bubbles or not. The fact that Eleven showed no discomfort and made no attempt to sink below the water told him volumes about her upbringing. Those bastards got what they deserved at the middle school that night.

"Hurts," she repeated and gestured towards her feet.

"Can I see?"

She lifted a foot out from under the bubbles and he could see that her toes had gone from porcelain white to bright red.

"That's normal, unfortunately," he told her sympathetically. "Actually it's a good sign, it means the blood is coming back to your toes. You could have gotten serious frostbite being out there."

"Frost...bite?" she repeated the word back to him slowly.

"It means when your skin gets so cold that the blood can't move around right. It can get so cold that it actually freezes, but your toes doesn't look that bad. We got you warm in time." He gave her his best reassuring smile, but she just stared back with those same big eyes.

Hopper let Eleven's foot down back into the sudsy water and realized it had cooled off and turned slightly muddy.

"How about we get you cleaned up and then I'll drain this water and fill it up again with fresh?" he suggested. "It's getting kind of murky."

Hopper dipped a washcloth into the water, soaped it up and handed it to her, coaching her through the bathing process. He poured a glob of shampoo from the small bottle into her waiting hand and encouraged her to rub it into her scalp. He noticed that her hair had started to grow back, though she still looked more like a boy than a girl.

"Ok, kid. Step out of the tub, alright?" he held a towel out on front of him and averted his eyes until he had her wrapped in it. He lifted her up onto the bathroom vanity and handed her a bottle of the apple juice. "Drink this slowly. If you drink too quickly, you'll make yourself sick, understand?"

His mind unwillingly flashed back to Sara, small and shaking, desperate to keep anything down as a result of the poisons they were pumping into her body to try to kill her cancer. He gave her apple juice with damn near the same instructions.

Eleven sat perched on the edge of the counter wrapped in her towel and nursing the bottle of apple juice while Hopper ran a second bath, as hot as he thought she could handle with a fresh supply of bubbles.

"I'm going to have you stay in for another half hour or so to finish warming up and once we know you can keep the juice down, I'll give you more to eat, yeah?"

"Yes," she responded mechanically.

He left her in the bathroom, door half open and considered his options. He didn't have any other clothes for either of them to change into and he wasn't willing to leave her to go get any. He would have to make do. Her clothes were so filthy, they were actually crusted over, but he could wash them and at least buy himself another day. That didn't leave her anything to sleep in, so he stripped the flat sheet and blanket from the bed to wrap her in. In less than an hour,

she was clean, bundled, propped up with pillows and nibbling peanut butter crackers in the bed furthest from the door. She still had the thousand yard stare and there were dark circles under her eyes, but there was also color in her cheeks and he took it as a win.

"Ok, kid, I think I have a plan worked out. We're gonna sleep here tonight and then in the morning, I have a place I can take you where you'll be safe."

"With Mike?" her voice brightened slightly.

"Mike Wheeler? No, kid, sorry about that. Those bad men, they know he was hiding you and they're watching him to see if you go back there."

"Hurt him?"

"They haven't hurt him. And they won't unless they think it would get them to you. So for now, you need to stay hidden, ok? To keep him safe."

If they thought they could orchestrate a trade, Eleven for Mike just like Hopper had offered them Eleven for Will, he was confident they'd take Mike. The only way to keep everyone safe was to keep Eleven hidden from absolutely everyone.

Eleven nodded in understanding.

"I'm going keep watch, you go ahead and sleep," Hopper told her, positioning himself in a chair in front of the window. No one was going to enter the room without him knowing about it.

Eleven tried to stay awake, still not entirely confident in the situation, but for the first time in a long time she was warm, fed and comfortable and it wasn't long before she lost consciousness.

He watched her sleeping. It wasn't a peaceful sleep, but it was a deep one. The sort of sleep that comes from being bone tired. He was reminded again of Sara. Small. Vulnerable. Exhausted.

For the first time, he paused long enough to question himself. *What the hell did he think he was doing? He wasn't cut out for this.*

Reflexively, he reached for the prescription bottle that he no longer kept in his pocket but settled for a cigarette instead. The small flame quivered in his hands and he focused on the smell of igniting paper and the feel of smoke inside his chest. Hopper knew he wasn't what was best for anyone, not any more. But he was at least a better option than freezing to death in the woods or going back to being someone's science experiment.

At least on the surface, Sam Owens was a far cry from Martin Brenner, but Eleven was part of the mess Owens had been sent in to clean up and God only knew what they'd do with her. Owens had made his intentions very clear: the government wanted the whole business kept quiet. She wasn't a person to them, she wasn't even a valuable science experiment. She was simply a liability. They'd bury her, figuratively and literally. He was sure of it. He might be cursed, but she was doomed.

He would have to take the risk.

2. Chapter 2

Tuesday, December 13, 1983

Eleven was used to waking up in darkness.

Her room at the lab was dark when she was supposed to sleep and bright when she was supposed to be awake. She was kept deep within the lab, at the center of a windowless maze, so day and night were meaningless concepts to her. Her life consisted of a seemingly arbitrary and never ending pattern of lights on and lights off.

"Scared, Papa," she had told him, wanting so desperately for him to leave her something to occupy her in his absence other than the thoughts in her head.

"Come now, Eleven. There's nothing to be afraid of," his voice not unkind, but it was not at all sympathetic either. Papa was not one to humor foolishness.

"You see that camera?" he pointed to the black circular security camera mounted in the corner of her room. "That camera allows me to see you, even when it's dark. Nothing can hurt you because your Papa is always watching. Always."

"Yes, Papa."

After she ran away from Mike's house, she tried to sleep in the daytime as much as possible. It was colder at night, so she needed to keep moving to stay warm enough. And it was easier to move about undetected in the dark. It was not at all unusual for Eleven to fall asleep in the mid-day sun and awake to find the stars were already out.

But this morning was different. It wasn't the darkness, it was the darkness accompanied by a growling sort of sound and before she fully remembered where she was, she thought perhaps she'd been discovered by an animal. And then she felt the starchy stiffness of cheap cotton sheets around her and her eyes adjusted to the small slice of sunlight that fought its way through the thick curtains and

she realized: it wasn't an animal, it was the big sleeping man taking up two chairs spanning the floor in front of the door and the window so that no one could get in without his knowing. Or out, for that matter.

The man had a name, but what was it? She scoured her memory and came up blank.

She took advantage of the opportunity to observe him without him knowing. He looked younger than Papa but also more rough. He had a gun like the soldiers, but he wasn't neat and precise like they were. The man was much more messy. His hair needed cutting. His hands were calloused and browned. His fingernails were rough and had dirt under them. He wore a blue braided string around one wrist and a watch on the other.

He woke suddenly as though he was startled to find himself asleep. Perhaps he had intended to stay awake the whole night. Eleven closed her eyes and pretended to be sleeping, not sure if the man would be angry at her for staring. She listened closely to the sound of him pulling back the curtain for a quick peek before snapping it shut. He tied his books and buttoned up his top shirt that he had laid over a chair the night before. Then he walked into the bathroom and switched on the light which also turned on a fan. She couldn't hear him over the noise of the fan which meant he couldn't hear her.

Eleven looked at the door. The locks were on her side of the door, so she could let herself out and be gone before he realized. It occurred to her that she wasn't wearing any clothes and although she'd escaped from the lab wearing only a thin gown, returning to the snowy woods with nothing but a bare feet and a bed sheet was suicide. She would have to trust the man. At least for now.

"Eleven?" He called to her gently as he walked out of the bathroom leaving the light on behind him to illuminate the motel room. "Time to wake up, kid. We want to get out of here before anyone else is up and about."

Eleven peered out of her cocoon giving no indication that she'd been awake for some time or that she'd understood anything he had said. She caught sight of his name on his shirt before he covered it with his

coat. Hopper. Now she remembered Mike and her friends calling him that.

"Your clothes are dry," he continued, somewhat uncomfortable carrying on an entirely one sided conversation. He laid out the dress, socks and blue flannel shirt on the bed next to her and dropped her shoes on the floor below. "I'm going to get you a couple more things to eat while you get dressed. I have a key so I can let myself back in, alright?"

He looked at her long enough that she assumed he wanted an answer. "Yes." It was barely more than a whisper, but it earned her a smile. Papa also liked it when she agreed with him.

She dressed quickly and was tying her shoes when Hopper returned. "Ok, kid, looks like breakfast this morning is gonna be juice and Twinkies." He held out a bottle of orange liquid and a packet of yellow oblong cakes. "You can eat these in the car, but we need to get on our way."

Eleven took what he was offering and slipped the items into her coat pocket. Hopper opened the door and looked around the parking lot before waiving for her to follow him.

"Sit in the back on the floor so no one can see you through the windows, alright?"

She nodded and climbed into the vehicle. It was warmer than outside, but much colder than the motel room, so she shivered slightly and wrapped her coat tightly around her. Hopper noticed and retrieved a blanket from the back of the Blazer. "Emergency supplies," he explained and handed it to her. Again, he gave her a reassuring smile and again, she just stared blankly back at him.

He walked around the vehicle to get into his own seat where he settled in a bit before he took up his radio and talked to someone on his radio about not coming into work today. The disembodied voice seemed annoyed.

From her vantage point, it was impossible for Eleven to tell where they were driving. She closed her eyes and tried to see if she could

feel a proximity to Mike. She could not.

"You doing ok back there?" Hopper asked her looking in the rear view mirror.

"Yes," Eleven responded automatically, assuming it was expected. And then, just to test the waters she added, "Is Mike...doing ok?"

"Yeah, kid. He's safe. He's come to the station a couple times asking if I have any new information about you. Thing is though, we can't let him know about you. Not yet. The bad men are still watching him. But once they're not watching him anymore, then we can tell him, okay?"

She nodded. It was disappointing to not be able to see Mike, but not surprising. She'd run away from his house for essentially the same reason.

"Will? Doing ok?" She repeated the simple sentence now that she understood it's meaning.

"Me and his mom, we got to him just in time. He's still kind of sick, but he's getting better. We never would have found him without you. You saved him, you know that?" Hopper smiled at her through the rear view mirror. Eleven didn't respond, but instead opted to stare up at the small patch of sky visible through the car windows before mustering up the courage to ask the most frightening question.

"Papa?"

Hopper's face darkened at the mention of Papa and Eleven braced herself for his anger. "He's gone, El. That monster..the demogorgon you kids called it? It got him. He can't hurt you anymore." And just like that the anger was gone. Maybe he wasn't angry at her. Maybe he was angry at Papa. Perhaps they were enemies and that's why he was helping her.

Mike was safe. Will was safe. But *Papa is always watching. Always.* She wasn't convinced even death could stop him.

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The car jostled back and forth as it left paved road behind and eventually came to a stop.

"We've got to walk a bit from here," Hopper told her as he turned back toward her. Eleven simply stared. If there was ever anyone who met the definition of shell shocked, she was it.

They picked their way through the woods, concentrating on not tripping over fallen branches or unexpectedly deep patches of snow. After several minutes the cabin finally came into view. Old, worn, slightly sagging, but also remote, familiar and safe.

The door protested as Hopper forced it open and he kicked the doorframe to knock the snow from his boots. Eleven copied him, not really understanding why other than hoping to gain his approval.

"My granddad used to live here long time ago," Hopper explained as they both looked around the cabin. It was dusty and filled with cobwebs. "I mainly just use it for storage now."

There were many boxes stored in the cabin and Hopper eyed the one labeled "Sara."

All the doubts about his ability to keep Eleven safe came rushing back to him but now there was something new. "Lot of history here," Hopper continued his monologue. He hid Sara's box and in that moment he couldn't have said if it was to hide Sara from Eleven or the other way around. He was not trying to replace Sara, he told himself even though it did nothing to mitigate his sense of guilt.

"So, uh...what do you think?" He asked her, hoping to get some sort of reaction from her. Even an acknowledgement would help. "It's a work-in-progress. It takes a little imagination, but once we fix it up, its gonna be nice. Real nice."

Still nothing but a blank stare. He realized she had no idea why he'd brought her here or what his intentions were. "This is your new home."

Eleven turned and looked at him and it was the most engaged she'd been since she'd asked him if Mike and Will were ok.

"Home," she confirmed.

Cleaning up the cabin was a process. It was messy and disorganized, and even once it was picked up and swept, it was still rough and lived in. Eleven thought that the cabin was a lot like Hopper himself.

"C'mere, kid, I need to show you something," Hopper said, waiving her over to him. "This is a radio. You've seen this kind before, right?"

"Yes."

"Ok, well I don't want you talking on it because anyone with a radio close enough or powerful enough can hear it. We can use code, alright? Just keep it simple so no one will understand if they overhear it."

"You won't be here?" Eleven was not used to being left alone. Alone in her room or in the dark room or in the bath, but even when she couldn't see them, there was always someone on the other side of the door. *Always watching. Always.*

"Yeah I'll be here, but I've got work and I need to keep things looking normal. After I put locks on the door, I've gotta go into town to get us some groceries," Hopper told her, not really understanding her confusion.

Hopper watched a change come over Eleven's face, but had no way of knowing it was the disappointing realization that she was, yet again, in captivity. He assumed that she was anxious about being left alone and tried to reassure her. "I won't be long and here..." Hopper scanned the cabin looking for something to occupy her time. He spotted a jigsaw puzzle that he hoped was at least mostly complete. "...you can work on this while I'm gone. It'll give you something to do."

"What is it?"

"It's a puzzle. You see these little pieces all have a part of the big picture on them. If you fit them together correctly, then they'll match

it." When she showed no signs of understanding, Hopper took the box over to the small table near the kitchen. "I'll show you."

He started separating the border pieces until he found a few that fit together. "You keep working on it, I'm going to get the locks put on the door and then when I get back from the store, you can show me how far you've gotten."

Eleven wasn't quite sure the purpose of the task Hopper had set her, but that wasn't unusual for her. Papa gave her a lot of tasks that she didn't understand. "Yes," she answered simply and he smiled in confirmation. She would complete the picture, she would learn the code, she would even sweep correctly. She would do her best to please him and keep him happy until she could see Mike again.

There was something off about the whole exchange, although Hopper couldn't put his finger on it. He wrote it off to Eleven's obvious trauma and figured it would simply get better with time. In any case, he had more pressing things to do like reinforcing the door. He gathered his cordless drill and the assortment of hardware he'd found while cleaning the cabin and set to work, oblivious to the furtive glances Eleven was casting his way as she tried to figure out why he was putting the locks on the inside of the door where only she could undo them.

"Ok, kid," he told her as he stepped back to inspect his work. "That's gonna have to work for now. I'll be gone about an hour or two. Lock the door behind me and don't let anyone in other than me, ok? Use the radio if you need anything."

After Hopper left, Eleven sat for a time considering her options. Unlike that morning, she had her clothes and her coat. She could just walk out that door and disappear into the woods. But what if he was watching to catch her disobeying him and he only prete to leave as some sort of a test.

She lifted just the very edge of the curtain covering the nearest window, daring Hopper to catch her. Nothing happened.

She walked to a stack of boxes Hopper had told her to not worry about, flipped open a lid at random and looked through the stack of

papers in the box, none of which made any sense to her. Nothing happened.

She turned her attention to the door. Or more specifically, the locks. Eleven contemplated The Ultimate Act of Defiance. If Hopper was watching her, surely he wouldn't let her just open the locks. Eleven slid the first lock open, then the second, then the third. Nothing happened.

Maybe Hopper wasn't watching after all. Maybe he really was hiding her from the Bad Men and not keeping her captive for himself. Maybe he was telling the truth about Mike and taking her to see him once the Bad Men were no longer looking for her.

But just in case, she would finish the picture like he told her to.

3. Chapter 3

Wednesday, December 14, 1983

Shortly after Hopper's grandmother died, his grandfather sold their house in town and moved to his secluded hunting cabin on a permanent basis. Looking back at it as an adult, Hopper now realized it was the act of a grieving man protesting the injustice of having to go on living after the loss of his wife. As a child, Hopper saw it as his own personal summer camp where he could run relatively feral for weeks at a time, learning to hunt, fish and track from his doting grandfather. The senior Hopper was a gruff curmudgeon to practically everyone except the small boy, who could do no wrong. Hopper's father would comment on how much young Jim was like his grandfather. Sometimes it was intended as a compliment, sometimes not so much. Hopper idolized his grandfather and so always took great pride in the comparison. He wasn't much older than Eleven when his grandfather passed and the cabin went from being a beloved part of Hopper's childhood to a place where the family's junk went to die.

The choice to bring Eleven there had a lot of practical advantages. It was remote. It was defensible. It was situated on land Hopper knew like the back of his hand. But whether it was consciously part of his decision or not, there was at least a part of him that saw righting the wrong he'd done to Eleven as his opportunity to become the sort of man his grandfather would have been proud of and so it seemed a fitting setting.

"You awake, kid?" Hopper tapped on the open bedroom door, trying not to startle Eleven. "I've got you a proper breakfast this time, not just juice and Twinkies."

She sat up in the bed, tangled in the sheets and a quilt Hopper was reasonably confident his grandmother hand stitched. "I know you like Eggos and I made you bacon and eggs to go with it," Hopper continued, and then when Eleven still didn't seem to understand the invitation, he added encouragingly, "Come sit down at the table and give it a try."

She took her seat just like he'd shown her last night and he set the plate of food in front of her before setting down his own plate and settling in.

"Good huh?" Hopper asked her and smiled. Eleven speared a steaming hot bite of egg into her mouth and simply stared back at him.

It was not lost on Hopper that Eleven was, as his grandmother would have said, as nervous as a cat in a room full of rocking chairs. She jumped at every noise and, when he carelessly hit his head on a hanging light fixture and swore from the surprise and pain, there was no mistaking the look of fear on her face. She couldn't have said more than a few dozen words to him and half of those seemed to be "yes," as though, when in doubt, she just agreed with him to try to placate him.

Beyond that, Eleven's complete lack of basic knowledge was shocking. As near as he could tell, she didn't know what a kitchen was or a hair brush or pajamas or most of the items in the cabin. The memory of her room at the lab haunted him. He could only imagine what had gone on in that tiny, windowless cell that led to her being like she was. What if she was just too far gone for him to help? He felt like he owed it to her, but he berated himself for thinking that somehow playing house in the remote cabin was going to be enough.

And then there was the guilt. Irrational though it may be, he couldn't escape the feeling that he was being disloyal to Sara by bringing another little girl into his home. Hopper pushed that thought away and focused his attention on devising some way to get Eleven talking so he could tell if she were genuinely incapable or just unwilling. An idea struck him midway through a slice of bacon.

"So, hey, I notice you're not much of a talker," he started in a failed attempt at humor. "What I thought we'd try is learning at least one new word every day. Does that sound doable?"

"Yes," Eleven responded obediently. Hopper didn't expect her to express any objection regardless of her personal feelings on the subject.

"Whenever you hear a word you don't know or if you have any

question at all," he continued, "you can just ask me and I'll explain it to you. But we'll have a word of the day and we'll look it up in the dictionary and you try to use that word so that you really learn it and remember it. Sound good?"

"What is..dicks..." She began and faltered, not quite remembering the entire word.

"Dictionary?" He guessed and she nodded. Of *course* the first word she would need to look up in the dictionary was dictionary itself. Hopper pushed back from the table, retrieved a hard bound book from the shelf and sat back down across from Eleven.

"This is a dictionary," he held it out for her to see. "It's a book that tells you what words mean. So we turn to the 'D' section and here it is: *a book giving information on particular subjects or on a particular class of words, names or facts, arranged alphabetically*. So there you are, your first word of the day."

He passed her the open book and she traced her fingers over the text. "Dictionary," she repeated softly to herself.

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When Hopper had left to buy groceries the previous day, he'd also picked up a some clothes for himself and bought a few things for Eleven. He picked out boy's clothing figuring that if anyone questioned him, he could pass it off as picking up some things for Joyce's boys. Hopper thought of it as supplying Eleven with basic necessities. In Eleven's experience, Papa only brought her gifts when he meant to reward her for something she'd done particularly well or when he expected her to do something new and difficult. She nervously wondered what Hopper would want her to do to earn so many new things

Once she was dressed in clothing that was appropriate to the weather, Hopper took Eleven outside to help him secure the property.

"I'm going to have to get back to work tomorrow, so you'll be on your own for the whole day. I want to make sure you'll be safe, ok?"

She didn't answer but she did watch intently as he attached screws and a contraption he'd been working on to a tree. She held a pair of pliers for him and a spool of wire.

"Now this is called a trip wire," he explained patiently as he wound the wire around the mouse trap he'd mounted to a tree. She looked over his shoulder at what he was doing, committed to learning what he was teaching her. "It's like an alarm. You set it up like this, and then if anyone gets close it's gonna make a loud noise. Like gunfire. Bang!" Eleven jumped slightly and Hopper laughed lightly while giving her arm a reassuring squeeze before suddenly becoming somber. "Those bad men aren't gonna find you, all right? Not way the hell out here. We'll have to take some precautions. There's gonna be a couple ground rules."

Ah yes, rules. Now they were getting down to it. But the rules weren't like any Eleven had experienced before. They were all focused on making sure the bad men wouldn't find her, but nothing about what she was supposed to do with her day. And nothing that sounded like it benefited Hopper at all. It was difficult to accept that maybe he really was just being kind without expecting anything else in return.

A friend is someone you'd do anything for.

Maybe he wasn't like Papa at all. Maybe he was a friend like Mike.

4. Chapter 4

Saturday, December 17

Even though she was still somewhat nervous in his presence, Eleven had decided that the cabin was too quiet when Hopper was gone.

It was warm and comfortable. There was a television to watch, food to eat, and puzzles to work (or not work, evidently), but the lack of structure to her day was oddly disorienting. Not that she wanted to return to the lab, but there was something to be said for having a rhythm and some sort of purpose.

He had promised that his absences wouldn't always be so long, but he'd called off work for the first few days after finding her and so now he had to "play catch-up." *Catch-up* was her second word of the day. Papa never got behind on anything, so the concept as well as the word were entirely new to her.

And so it was that Eleven found herself all alone on a Saturday afternoon with nothing much to do other than to wait for Hopper to return.

She sat on the sofa wrapped in her quilt listening to a winter wind whipping through the trees. It was a powerful enough storm to disrupt the television reception so Eleven had given up and turned it off. However imperfect the cabin was, at least she wasn't outside trying to survive the weather. She shivered at the mere thought and pulled the quilt more tightly around her shoulders, hugged her stuffed bear to her chest and reminded herself that she wouldn't be lonely forever. Hopper would come home and they would eat dinner. And someday soon she would get to see Mike.

Mike. Every time she thought about him, it was like pulling off a scab. It hurt to know he was so close but not be able to see him. Eleven had lost track of how many times she had tried to quiet her mind and sink into her consciousness in the hopes of finding Mike in The Void. She passed a lot of the time she spent in the woods trying and she'd made it her secret hobby here in the cabin whenever Hopper was gone, but to no avail. Eleven could sense Mike's

presence, but whether it was because he was too far or she was too distracted, without a bath to enhance her powers, he remained just out of reach.

Eleven sniffled and wiped away the small spot of blood created by the effort and then her attention turned to the radio situated on a small table behind the television. She'd been able to project Will's voice through Mike's radio, maybe she could do the same thing with Mike's voice through Hopper's radio. Even if she couldn't see him, to be able to hear his voice was at least something.

The radio was kept tuned to channel 11 when Hopper was gone. Anyone could use any channel they pleased, she'd learned, but it was nice to think of that channel as hers. Just like she'd done in Mike's basement while she looked for Will, Eleven scanned each channel on the radio, willing Mike's voice to find its way to her. She picked up garbled snips of other people's conversations, but the cabin was too remote and most other people's radios were too weak for their signals to reach her. Just as she was about to give up she thought she heard him and redoubled her efforts to amplify Mike's voice through the radio. It was just there but also not like the dream you know you had but can't quite remember and right as she thought she had it, her concentration was broken by loud knocking on the door. Twice, once, three times.

She flipped the locks with more irritation than was technically warranted and let Hopper into the cabin with swirls of windblown snow following him. Eleven returned the radio to channel 11 while Hopper went through the routine of removing his hat, jacket and side arm.

"That's one heck of a wind out there. Cuts straight to the bone," he told her conversationally. She didn't respond. He wasn't surprised. He followed up, "How are we doing for firewood?"

She glanced at the stack next to the wood stove and shrugged. Surely he could see as well as her that there was enough to get them through the night, but probably not the morning.

"Yeah, I should probably load up now, huh?" he asked rhetorically and, again, she didn't respond.

Hopper noticed that Eleven watched him constantly and adjusted their positions so that she remained just a certain distance away. It was an awkward sort of orbit.

"Did you eat lunch?" Hopper tried again and at least this time Eleven nodded but didn't volunteer anything beyond that.

"It's still a bit early," he observed. "If you're not too hungry yet, I'll make dinner later. Is that good?"

"Good," she responded. It wasn't much, but at least it was something. Hopper wasn't used to talking to himself and it was about to drive him crazy.

"So..um...", he looked around the room, looking for something to talk about. "Is the TV out?"

"Yes," she whispered softly and then added, "Wind."

"Yeah, I figured," he responded lamely before falling silent, having run out of mindless, one-sided small talk.

Hopper sank into the arm chair with a sigh and rubbed his hand over his face. "Look, kid," he told her, "I know you don't talk much, but you've gotta give me some kinda clue here. I get it, this is probably boring and lonely for you. If there's something you want..."

Hopper trailed off and Eleven sat for a moment before walking across the small living room to sit on the sofa. The quilt was still wrapped around her shoulders like a cape and the bear was tucked under her arm.

"Mike," she said and in that one plaintive word, she spoke volumes.

"You miss him, don't you?" Hopper asked empathetically.

"Yes," Eleven's voice almost cracked. Even if she had all the words in the dictionary to describe her feelings, it would never be enough. A simple yes was no less inadequate than a lengthy monologue.

"I can check on him for you," Hopper offered and she shook her head.

"See him?" she asked hopefully even though she knew the answer.

"Not yet, kid. We have to wait for the Bad Men to give up. Soon."

Eleven looked down at her lap and pulled her feet in closer, curling herself into a protective little ball. Hopper's heart broke seeing her look so defeated.

"So, um, I was thinking," Hopper started slowly, questioning the wisdom of what he was about to say even as he said it. "You know that night at Joyce's house? How you tried to find Will with the radio? How does that work, exactly?"

Eleven had no ability to describe how she did it, so she merely shrugged.

"You're not sure how you do it or you can't explain?" Hopper asked.

"Can't explain."

"Can you see the other person?"

"Sometimes."

"Can the other person see you?"

"No."

Hopper was getting excited. Even though her responses were one and two word sentences, this was the most he'd heard Eleven speak in a single sitting. He also felt like they were progressing towards something rather than just floundering helplessly and he was a man who hated feeling helpless.

"Do you think you could find Mike?" And there it was. The \$64,000 question.

"Tried," Eleven responded sadly.

"Of course you have. So does the pool just, what, make it easier?"

Eleven nodded silently.

"Ok, so the pool with the goggles...or those water tanks you call the bath, it's really just a sort of sensory deprivation tank," Hopper was talking through it mostly for his own benefit, but assuming she'd correct him if he got it wrong. "I mean, the point is to make it totally dark and totally quiet so you don't get distracted by what you see or hear, yeah?"

Again Eleven nodded and Hopper thought a moment longer, trying to devise a solution.

"I can't make you a pool, but how about white noise and a blind fold?"

"White noise?" Eleven asked confused. This was a new term to her.

"Yeah, so if you can't make something completely quiet, you can have a kind of noise that's just kind of repetitive so it covers up any noises that would be distracting. It helps some people sleep, you know, like a fan or running water or..." Hopper's attention fell on the darkened television screen. "Or static."

Eleven looked at him quizzically and Hopper jumped up to turned on the television, bathing them in the flickering blue grey light and flooding the room with the dull roar of a television without a signal.

"It's worth a shot, right?" he told her encouragingly and Eleven actually started to look engaged. "Just, uh, promise me you won't try to talk to him, alright? If anyone knows about you it's a risk. Just—"

"— don't be stupid," Eleven completed his sentence for him.

"Yeah, don't be stupid."

Hopper scanned the room for a suitable blindfold before settling on a dark grey wood scarf. Eleven sat on the floor in front of the television and Hopper helped her tie the scarf in place around her head before retreating back to the nearby arm chair to watch.

The thought occurred to Eleven that Hopper was getting her to expand her powers, though, unlike Papa, it really was for her benefit not his. The possibility of hearing or maybe even seeing Mike was just too good to pass up.

She sat quiet and still, just like Papa had taught her until the edges of her own existence began to melt and gave way to the blank darkness of the Void. Eleven spun around checking to make sure that there were no monsters looking for her and, finding none, ventured tentatively looking for Mike.

"El?" She heard her name being called from somewhere behind her. She turned towards the sound and saw Mike sitting cross legged in the blanket fort he'd made her cupping his walkie talkie to his face.

"Are you out there?" He asked and then paused allowing her to answer. She wanted to answer so, so badly. But Hopper had warned her that doing so only put Mike at risk. So, at least for now, she would remain silent. *"I hope you can hear me. This is day thirty-five. The Snow Ball is going on, like, right now. I'm not there, obviously. I didn't want to go if I couldn't be with you. I promised I would take you and I'm sorry I can't keep that promise. I just wish..."*

Mike released the press to talk button on his radio and took a minute to compose himself.

"Listen, no matter what anyone else says, I know you're out there. I can feel it. And also, the Bad Men must know you're out there too or they wouldn't be looking for you. I see them sometimes, watching us at school, hoping we'll lead them to you. So I guess at least I know they haven't found you either."

Again he paused hoping against hope that she might answer back.

"And El?" Mike continued, *"I want you to know that Hopper is looking for you too. So if you can't give me a sign without giving yourself away, at least give him one and he'll tell me. He figured out how to get Will back, maybe he can do the same for you. I miss you. I just wish I knew you were okay."*

A tear escaped and rolled down Mike's cheek before he wiped it away with the back of his hand. Eleven's own tears mixed with the blood from her nose.

And then Mike disappeared as though he were smoke and Eleven found herself back in the cabin. She pulled off the blindfold and

sniffled back tears.

"Did you find him?" Hopper asked her gently.

She nodded, tired and somewhat dizzy from the effort and the emotion.

"Ok, well, I guess that's something, right? Now you can visit him when you need to and maybe that will make things a little better," Hopper told her as he moved next to her on the cabin floor. He wiped the tears from her face and the blood from her nose before reaching past her to switch off the TV. When he leaned back to sit, Eleven leaned forward resting her head against his chest and allowing herself to ease her exhaustion with long overdue human contact. Whatever reservations she had, Mike was the one person in the world she knew she could count on. If he was willing to trust Hopper, then Eleven figured she should as well.

5. Chapter 5

A/N its short but its something I've been toying with to occupy myself until S3 hits.

Saturday, November 12, 1983.

Jim Hopper was no stranger to hospitals. Between having lost Sara and his parents and taking on shifts sitting with the families of officers injured in the line of duty, it seemed to him that he'd spent a disproportionate share of his life in some waiting room or another. Waiting for test results. Waiting for news. Waiting for the world to come crashing down around him. When Will Byers woke up and the wait turned into a happy reunion, Hopper felt like a third wheel (even if he was actually the seventh wheel) and he quietly slipped outside. He'd barely lit a cigarette and begun to contemplate the events of the last week when a car pulled up behind him. He knew before the balding man in a dark suit emerged that it was meant for him. Resigned to the deal he had struck, Hopper cast his lit cigarette to the ground and got into the waiting car.

The two men driving the darkly tinted vehicle didn't say a word as they drove Hopper past the edge of town to the twisting road that led to Hawkins National Lab. When the vehicle stopped, he waited for the door to open, knowing without needing to be told that he would not be able to open it from the inside. Hopper followed the first dark suited man into the building while the second man remained in the driver's seat. Uniformed soldiers flanked each doorway, standing guard as Hopper was led into the bowels of the building. He mentally prepared himself to be returned to an interrogation room and was mildly surprised to instead be deposited into a wood paneled conference room.

"Wait here," the dark suited man told him finally speaking the first words of the evening.

As the doors closed, Hopper could see a pair of soldiers resume their position on either side of the door and he knew he would be sitting in that conference room until whoever it was who sent for him decided to release him. Hating the knowledge that he was under someone

else's control, Hopper decided that the most rebellious thing to do under the circumstances would be to not perform for the cameras he assumed were watching. He poured himself a glass of water from the carafe placed at a wet bar at one end of the room with forced casualness and made himself comfortable in the chair at the head of the table before lighting a cigarette as though this was his meeting and he was the one patiently waiting for everyone else to get their shit together and show up.

He was only halfway through his cigarette when an older man with walked into the room as though Hopper had been invited out to lunch instead of practically kidnapped. "Chief Hopper?" the question was so utterly unnecessary that not even the man waited for any sort of answer or acknowledgment, "Dr. Sam Owens. Pleasure to meet you."

That was his first of many encounters with Dr. Owens. Unlike his predecessor, the good doctor was affable, at least on the surface, but he was also a government man through and through. He was there to execute a cover up, to erase the events of the preceding week at whatever cost. This was not Hopper's first experience with a government sanctioned cleaner and in his experience, their methods weren't markedly different than their mafia counterparts. He certainly knew enough to know that the men who did that sort of work could make anything...and anyone for that matter...simply disappear for the convenience of the greater good.

The deal Owen's put to him was simple: Owens would put Brenner's genie back in the bottle, Hopper would keep things nice and quiet.

"And keep an eye out for her," Owens cautioned Hopper as he slid an open file across the table with a picture of a child with buzzed hair and a haunted expression clipped to it. Subject 011. Their little science experiment. "She doesn't look like much, but that kid's got one hell of a body count. As a matter of public safety, she needs to be recovered."

Saturday, December 17, 1983

Hopper lost track of how long he'd been sitting on the floor, holding Eleven to his chest and stroking her shorn hair. Long enough for his

legs to fall asleep and his back to ache.

"Ok, kid," he finally told her, "I'm gonna make you a deal."

"Deal?" she asked uncertainly, looking up to meet his eyes.

"Yeah, a deal. Like an agreement? You know what an agreement is?"

She nodded.

"You can use the TV to go visit Mike as often as you want just so long as you don't let him know. You don't want to put him at risk, do you?"

She shook her head.

"Good girl. Now, how about you and me have some dinner?"

She nodded obediently and gave her cheeks a final wipe with the back of her hand. There was something so innocently childlike about the gesture that it pained Hopper even more than the effort it took to pull himself up off the floor. Hooper lumbered into the kitchen, stretching his back as he pulled out things necessary for a basic dinner.

"You wanna help?" he suggested when he noticed Eleven staring at him.

She didn't respond, but ventured into the kitchen with him, placing herself in closer than normal proximity to him. Hopper mentally celebrated this as a win and proceeded to show her how to light the gas stove and boil water for the pasta. She jumped a little when the blue flame popped up and even smiled at her own reaction. He showed her how to brown some ground beef to add to the canned tomato sauce and stepped back to admire the tranquility of the domestic scene he'd just set.

Maybe that little bit of contact with the Wheeler kid was just what she needed, he thought to himself. *Maybe she wasn't beyond saving. Maybe this could all work after all.*

And then Eleven brushed a dish towel too close to the gas stove and

it caught fire.

Eleven didn't really register the exact words Hopper used, but they were loud and sharp and his hands on her upper arms were large and restraining. After he'd successfully moved her out of the way and safely extinguished the dish towel, he turned to find Eleven frozen in place, trembling and staring up at him with huge eyes that brimmed with unshed tears.

Hopper sighed. One step forward, two steps back.

"Talk to me, kid," he told her gently, desperate for information that would help him get through to her. "Tell me why you're afraid."

Eleven's desire to appease Hopper through obedience warred with her reluctance to say anything about the lab and she finally settled on, "You're mad."

"I'm not mad," he assured her, "You scared me and I shouldn't have yelled. I'm sorry, okay? But I'm not mad."

"Promise?" her voice cracked a little and Hopper cursed himself.

"I promise," he reassured her. "Look, kid. I need you to tell me something, ok? I need you to help me understand. When the bad men got mad at you, what happened?"

Eleven's trembling increased and she closed her eyes and balled her fists trying to get control of herself.

"Dark room," she whispered as though she was afraid that speaking the words aloud might lead the bad men to her.

"They put you in a dark room? What, as some kind of a punishment?" Hopper asked her.

Eleven responded with only a slight nod. Her eyes still closed, her fists still clenched.

"What did the dark room look like?"

"Small."

How small?

She opened her eyes and looked around her for something to compare it to. When she gestured with her arms to show it was a room roughly the size of a closet, he realized why she didn't want him to close the bathroom door."

"How dark was it?" Hopper hoped he wasn't over playing his hand, but the more he knew about her past, the more he could help her. "Was there any light?"

She shook her head with the barest possible movement.

"How long would they leave you in there?"

She shrugged because, in truth, it wasn't possible to tell how long you were in a place like that. She merely answered, "Long. Hungry."

Hopper struggled to contain his reaction lest Eleven think his anger was directed at her. He'd seen the effect solitary confinement had on hardened street thugs, using it to control a small child was a form of psychological torture.

"Ok, kid," he got down low and very softly tipped her chin up in order to make eye contact with Eleven. "There's no dark room here. And rules are important - *especially* our don't be stupid rules - but nothing like that is ever going to happen to you here, ok?"

She considered the man standing before her. Large like Papa and the bad men, but so very different. And Mike said she could trust him, so did that make him a friend? If he was, she could trust him because friends don't lie. That's what Mike has taught her.

"Yes," she whispered in agreement. Still leery but transferring her absolute trust in Mike to Hopper.

"That's why we have to keep you safe," Hopper explained thinking about Owens and wondering how, if ever, he could bring the man around to thinking of Eleven as anything other than the secret weapon she'd been raised to be. "So that no one can hurt you again."

6. Chapter 6

Friday, January 6, 1984

Hopper turned off his flashlight as he mounted the cabin's front porch and knocked twice, once, three time. U S. It was a self indulgent password he wasn't ready to own the significance of to anyone yet; not even himself. The locks flipped open and he walked in to find Eleven sitting across the room watching him. He knew she had these abilities, he'd witnessed her use them on a daily basis, but yet, somehow he still found it difficult to wrap his brain around them in practice.

"Hey, kid," he greeted her warmly and she gave him a small smile in return. "What did you get up to today?"

Eleven looked over at the television. The screen was black now, but Hopper has the sneaking suspicion that she'd been spending her whole days parked in front of it while he was at work. He couldn't blame her as she must get pretty bored, but he was pretty sure it wasn't good for her either.

Not long after Sara died, Hopper realized that he either had to find a way to turn off the memories or else be lost to them. He'd almost managed to keep them locked away, but every now and again, one would escape. Usually it was a painful reminder of the life he'd lost but sometimes, especially now, it was actually helpful to him. He unconsciously touched the blue hairband around his wrist and recalled the times when he worked the night shift opposite Diane in order to save on daycare for Sara. How Diane lectured him about the need for structure and routine and not just television even it if was PBS. Diane didn't need to know that their routine consisted of coffee and donuts before making their way to the park to hang out with the old men playing chess on concrete tables.

"So, uh, I've been thinking," he began haltingly as he removed his hat, coat and sidearm. "You have a lot of learning to do to catch up to other kids your age, you know? So we could being using our time to work on that."

"School?" she asked with guarded hopefulness.

"Well," he hesitated, not wanting to dash her hopes. "Sure, just not right away. Right now, those bad men are still looking for you and they'd just walk right into that school and take you. So we've got to be smart about this, yeah?"

"Yes." It was back. The reluctant I-know-I-don't-really-have-a-choice-in-the-matter-so-I'm-saying-yes-because-you-expect-me-to yes. God, how he hated that yes.

"There are some books I could bring you and you could work on them during the day. It would give you something to do other than watching TV."

And even though Hopper had never asked her to do anything unpleasant, other than to keep the curtain closed when she showered so that water didn't get all over the bathroom (and when she managed to drench the bathroom testing the limits of just how much she could leave the curtain open, he didn't even get mad at her), Eleven was leery of being given tasks to complete.

Hopper noticed the change in her facial expression and tried to lighten the mood, "I brought you something." Hopper reached for the shopping bag Eleven didn't realize he'd set down next to the cabin door and held it out to her. If anything Eleven appeared to be even more apprehensive. He didn't understand why the promise new things wasn't enticing to her. There was no way for Hopper to know that Papa's gifts always came with strings attached, so the timing of bringing up school work followed by a reward was an unfortunately familiar pattern to her.

Eleven swallowed hard and took the bag from his waiting hand because it was clear to her that was what he expected. The bag held a mismatched assortment of rectangular boxes, some with brightly colored designs and others with pictures of smiling children.

"Board games," he announced, answering the unspoken question. Hopper was rather proud of himself for having figured out a way to spend their evenings other than just awkward attempts at one sided small talk.

"Don't know how," she told him nervously.

"That's ok, I'll teach you after dinner, alright?"

She nodded and sat at the table to watch Hopper begin a meal. After the unfortunately incident with the dishcloth, Eleven was reluctant to use the stove again and Hopper decided to not push it.

They began with checkers. It was simple and required no outside knowledge. And unlike backgammon that was printed on the flip side of the checker board, Hopper could actually remember the rules. Hopper pulled out the black and cream game board and showed Eleven how to set up the little red and black disks.

"Are you *sure* that's where you want to move?" Hopper asked when Eleven so obviously put her last three pieces into harm's way that it couldn't have simple unfamiliarity with the game. She paused, finger still on the piece in question and tried to get a read on him. Eleven wasn't sure what to make of a game where the only two possible outcomes were for her to fail or for her to make Hopper fail and she was conflicted trying to decide which result he was looking for. Papa would not have wanted either.

She moved the piece in the opposite direction, effectively trapping one of Hopper's few remaining pieces and noticed that even though his face wasn't smiling, his eyes were. He did want her to win, after all. Eleven found that when her attentions were focused on the strategy of the game rather than the strategy of pleasing Hopper, she actually enjoyed playing. After the fifth round, Hopper checked his watch and was surprised to see it was almost 9:30 pm.

"Alright, kid," he told her and he leaned back in his chair to stretch his back, "that's enough for tonight. We should probably get some sleep."

Eleven nodded silently as she slid out of her seat at the table and headed into her bedroom. Hopper repacked the game pieces into the box, cleaned the small number of dishes still sitting in the sink and found himself smiling absently. It had been a nice evening, he'd found a way to connect with Eleven that didn't require her to talk too much and she seemed like she'd genuinely enjoyed herself. He was

about to reward himself with a beer while watching the late news when he looked up to find her half-hidden by her bedroom door, staring out at him.

"Everything ok?" He asked her, having long since given up on waiting for her to start the conversation.

She shifted her weight from one foot to the other, not knowing how to express her desires and not sure how Hopper would respond anyway.

"It's...alone."

"Alone? Do you mean you're lonely?"

She nodded solemnly.

When Eleven first came to the cabin, she was so exhausted that she didn't fall asleep so much as lose consciousness. Once she physically recovered from a month of living in the rough, he was aware that she took longer to fall asleep, but it hadn't occurred to him that she might be lonely. Another memory slipped free. One about Sara in the hospital when she couldn't sleep because of the lights left on for the nurses and the sounds of the machines and the fear of knowing that death was hunting her. Powerless to do much of anything else, he read to her for hours. He vaguely remembered Diane telling him something about the educational importance of reading to children. He didn't read to Sara to make her smarter, he read to her to distract them both from the hopelessness of her situation, but Eleven could probably use both a the education boost and the distraction.

The only children's book in the cabin was tucked away in the flowered box labeled "Sara" and he wasn't ready to share that with Eleven. It felt disloyal, somehow.

"You want to watch some TV with me until you're tired?" he offered her instead, thinking he would get some appropriate books the next day.

Again she nodded and settled into the sofa while he turned on the news. In the time it took him to walk the ten feet from the TV set to

the sofa, she'd already changed the channel. She suppressed an impish grin and he pretended to be annoyed. There weren't many channels to choose from, but when the weather was right, their rabbit ear antenna could pick up a station out of Chicago that played old movies after the prime time array of sitcoms and dramas were done for the night. "Stop here," he told her when he recognized a young John Wayne and Jimmy Stuart.

Eleven humored him because she wanted the company, though she had trouble following the plot of what exactly happened to Liberty Valance. Hopper watched Eleven's head bob up and down as she fought off sleep before she finally came to rest against his arm. He indulged himself in her soft little snores and stroked her hair that was just barely long enough to start to curl. He never would have guessed that when hair finally grew back, it would be curly. The painful thought that Sara's curly hair never had a chance to grow back crossed his mind and he quickly squashed it.

Tomorrow he would buy Eleven some of her own books and begin the monumental task of bringing her education current. But tonight he would let her sleep against his arm at least a little while longer.